

## Spiritual Gathering Drum Circles

By Shannon Ratigan - [drumcircles.net](http://drumcircles.net)



I facilitate drum circles quite often for spiritual gatherings, religious services, and drumming in churches, pretty often. Sometimes they are outdoors, sometimes in the church, or in the Rec hall, or parish hall after a Sunday service, or for a special event they are having. Sometimes even at weddings and/or receptions.

Many drum circles in churches focus on spirituality; some others focus more on drumming as a social activity. Some groups like to bring in a variety of activities on a monthly basis. A drum circle can be one of many.

I work with all paths from New Age, to Baptist, Catholic, Presbyterian, UU, and Episcopal churches, as well as groups of pastors. I'm open to most any group that wants to drum.



**These are just my opinions, and I hope to help anyone that is considering doing this kind of a drum circle.**

**I feel that if I am bringing drumming to someone or some group, it is a good thing, and it's good for them. No matter who they are. Or what path they are from, or what they may represent. The same goes for kids groups, adults, special needs, business, and corporate drum circles.**



**I hardly ever get asked what my faith or belief is, but I do get asked that sometimes. I say the truth, this: "I am respectful and understating of all faiths. This is what I do for a living, and I have to be respectful of all paths, and faiths." Most of the time they understand, and it doesn't go beyond that. The caterer at church functions hardly ever gets grilled, so neither should I. I'm just there to bring drumming to people,**

and help to guide them on a spiritual drumming experience, if that is what they wish to have.

 [IMAGE: church drum circle 4]

We all have certain boundaries on who we want to work for. I have mine. And if working with a particular group feels uncomfortable to you, well, you make your own decisions on who you want to drum with. Whether you volunteer your time, or are hired to do this, it can be very satisfying work. It doesn't pay very well monetarily, but it does inside your heart. You are helping to facilitate a spiritual drum circle experience, and helping to bring some joy into the community, and the world. Even if it only reaches a few people.

More and more groups are realizing the significance of spiritual drum circles. It's not just for visionaries anymore. One pastor I worked for was criticized for doing this, until he invited the other pastors to attend one. They changed their mind once they experienced the power of a drum circle and how meaningful it was to the congregation.

When I'm approached to host a drum circle at a spiritual gathering, or church, I don't have a problem with it. Drum circles bring people from all paths together, and the world would be a better place if they sat down and drummed about it. Communicating musically transcends talking, and there would be a lot less fighting in the world.

When I am contacted for the first time about a spiritual drum circle, I always try to have a face to face short meeting with them, but it is not always possible. I want to better understand their vision of the drum circle, and exactly what they would like from it, and from me. I have done this communication via email only before, but I will try to have a meeting if I can. I recall one time it was for a conference that was a convention of pastors who were assembling from around the country. It wasn't possible to have a meeting, as even the organizer lived 3000 miles away.



The pastor at one particular church that I've done multiple drum circles for once said, "A drum circle is truly a spiritual experience." and "it will truly bless your life and the lives of your people." Well said.

It seems rather odd to me that I started on this drumming path for reasons that had to do with my needs. I started drumming because I was a hyperactive child, and then I joined the school band. Later on, facilitating drum circles turned into a hobby, and then into a calling. People began telling me that I was helping them reach new levels of spirituality. I almost fell over when one of the regulars at a weekly nightclub drum circle began calling me the group's Shaman, a holy man on a quest to use the drums to help the world. That was hard for me to accept intellectually, but at times, I can feel the group, and myself, tuning into something much bigger and



more important than I can even get my head around. So, while I can't explain it, I can merely let go and try and accept it.



Often with spiritual drum circles, some of the people will already have a drum of their own, and they will come parading into the circle with it. It always makes me smile when I see that.

Many times I've needed to research a particular church just because I wasn't familiar with their uniqueness. I should at least have some understanding of them and what their beliefs are before I go in there and bring a drum circle to them. What behavior from me might they expect, what are some of their practices, customs?

Real no - no's? I usually do a little homework here. It's the polite and professional thing to do. Would they like to begin with a prayer? Most of them do, but I always ask. Some also want to make announcements prior to any drumming. Knowing in advance if there will be kids in attendance is obviously very important. If it's out in a public place, are they okay with people happening by and joining in? Most of them are.

Be sure to make arrangements for them to have chairs set up, and mention that everyone will need to remove rings and jewelry prior to playing a drum. Mention to ask for some shade if out in direct sunlight.

If they are reluctant to remove jewelry I ask them to play a doumbek which can handle it better.

They will likely want to have a bulletin, flyer, or email they send out announcing the event. Ask them to mention that. Sometimes they will be serving refreshments or even a meal. Of course we would prefer them served after the drumming, and I do try to suggest that, but sometimes it's unavoidable and I have to roll with it. There may be a guest speaker before, then the meal, then the drumming.

If it's what they want, okay then.

Usually it's the pastor, or organizer is the one I ask questions like this. Sometimes the leader makes the decision before we start. Often, I can only ask them when I meet them just before the drum circle starts, and I'm still schlepping in my drums. They usually have somebody in the group whom this normally falls to.

Whatever group it is, I just try to be respectful of it. Most of the time, it's everyone standing and a prayer is said, and away we go. 1 - 2 - Bang the drum. I go with the vibe I feel there, as to how I start.

Sometimes there are mixed age kids with the group. It can be more fun, or more difficult. For the most part, I tend to keep the program a bit more mellow with earth, healing, and after a warm up rhythm, slower R&B style rhythms with a good downbeat that they can feel, but I always include a few key things if I can.



As far as the rhythms we play after the beginning, I almost always going with the feeling I get from the group.

The collective energy can guide me, if I let it. My instincts on it are usually pretty close to right. The good ol' default drum circle rhythm you hear at most freestyle drum circles makes a good ice breaker - warm up.

"pa\_Go-Do\_ta... pa\_Go-Do\_ta", etc. Or, the Heartbeat is a good one to get right into. Like this:

"Doum Doum tek-ka-tek-ka Doum Doum". Or keep it real simple with Go\_Do\_pa-ta-pa \_ (2 measures in 4/4 time. Bass bass, tone tone tone rest, and repeat). Use any rhythm that is basic, & easy to get the group groove going.

Many people have never touched a drum before, and the sooner I can get them playing and making music, the sooner their uneasiness or nerves will melt away. Less talking and more music making is my approach. I vocalize the first few bars and start playing the rhythm at about one third the normal tempo so people can latch onto it.

This way they don't feel a sense of catching up or worse, panic. Then I can ease up the tempo if it feels right for them. The one thing I do say before we start playing is, "Play however you want...whenever you want - whatever feels natural...just follow your heart, and THE BEAT." It usually gets a laugh, and that sets the right tone that this is going to be fun and not overly controlled.

I just want to get them playing and creating as quickly as possible. I let people know right away that the support rhythm I'm playing is just a starting point for them, they don't have to try and play that exact thing. Just add your unique voice to the group song and lets all take it wherever we want, together. After we play a few rhythms I touch on hand technique, and playing too loud. I don't want anyone to get injured, or be uncomfortable. If you can't hear the person playing across from you, it's too loud.

I have a slightly different set list of rhythms for a spiritual circle than I would use for other groups. I will usually change it as we go along, but having it handy gives me more confidence. Most of the time, it is all slow 4/4 rhythms with one or two up tempo ones to keep some variety mid way into the set.

If it's all slow tempo rhythms it doesn't have any ebb and flow. I mix in a 6/8 mother rhythm somewhere in there as well. I try to keep it spontaneous and fun, and I guide things from the side, not the center.

Most of the time, I'm just there to provide the drums, start a variety rhythms, bring them to an end so they don't go on for too long, and the rest just seems to fall into place. Imagine that.

After a rhythm ends, a nice rumble will get them all excited and clapping. I think it's important to take a few moments after a rhythm ends to let things "breathe" a little. Then start out a new one. I like to come up with different endings for rhythms so it doesn't get too routine. A fade out, count down, and so forth.

As with some of the other groups I work with, about half way through the drum circle, After a few rhythms, it's a great time to try the 2 people in the center, 2 at a time for a few minutes each. I bring two yoga mats, (or beachtowels if my vehicle is too cram packed to pack them in.) How it works is like this: About half way through the circle, I lay 2 yoga mats in the center of the circle before the next rhythm. I ask for 2 volunteers,

and, if they want to REALLY feel the healing power of the drum, I ask them to carefully lay down on them for a few minutes. (Starting applause for them helps.) I ask them to lay out flat on them, on their backs, arms to their sides, and close their eyes while we play a rhythm for a few minutes. When I offer up the idea, there are always a few takers on that one. And when they get up, the faces say it all. It's powerful to feel the drum downbeat absorbed into your body. It's spiritually very powerful, if done to a good slow tempo rhythm with a heavy downbeat.



If there is an allotted time, I like to leave them wanting more. So when I say this is our last rhythm, and we play it – after it is over I ask the group, “Should we play just one more?” The answer is almost always a resounding YES! And we do one more jam out for fun. It ends things on a high note. Or, you can go the other way, and make it more soft and meaningful. It really depends on the group dynamic that was created.

You can feel the vibe of which way it should go by this time.

At the end of a spiritual group drum circle, I almost always do the “Let them feel the healing energy of the drum, in their bodies thing also”. This is the one where at the end of the drum circle, I ask them to all stand up still in a circle, and hold their palms open and outstretched, opposite to each person next to them, and palms opposite facing each other. Hold your palms outstretched directly above each other's palms, about 12 inches apart.

Now slowly compress your hands to the other person without actually touching them to about an inch. Slowly compress your hands up and down slowly a few times and feel that energy. The oh's and ah's as they feel it compress – they are feeling their chi, or mojo in their bodies (some for the very 1st time). This is very powerful. Next, turn their hands into themselves, to let the healing power reach inward, into your bodies. Start from your head, and work it down slowly. This is incredibly powerful when you feel it for the first time.

This whole process takes about 3 – 5 minutes. It leaves a lasting impression.

That's why I try to get everyone to drum, and not just play a shaker, or tambourine for at least a half hour. I want to get that drumming energy flowing in their bodies. All you have to do then is show it to them at the end of the circle. It can bring up very deep feelings in people.

For the most part, everyone just wants to drum, make music, and have a healing spiritual experience. I think it's doing some good in the world.

There are quite a few references in the Bible to using song and dance as a means of worship. French African (Congolese) worship services use drumming and singing in praise music. Lots of people use drumming as an active way of meditation, so it's not really a huge leap to make that religious drumming connection.

Do drum circles in church really need to be much different from other drum circles that offer creative outlets, bonding, support, interpersonal interaction, etc? Not that much really, just a little more mellow, & less volume.



For the most part, I avoid drum circle games and activities, and just focus on in the moment, music making. I do bring along a few hula hoops and put them off to the side where everyone can see them. Once things get going someone usually grabs one and starts hooping. If they are outside the circle I invite them in the center. We all know that drumming to some sort of movement elevates the fun level and gives them something to connect the rhythm to. I like to have a wide open circle of at least 15 feet so there's room for people to get in there and express themselves. That's part of what this is about. One idea when working with just kids is drumming to Sunday school songs: "If you're happy and you know it, bang your drum" boom boom." And so on.

My favorite spiritual drum circle was at a Gospel church; I was later invited to attend their services, was welcomed like family, and got to play in the church band. It was cool. These were some heavy musicians, one of them toured with Herbie Hancock. What an honor to be welcomed there and play in the band. The singers in the choir were amazing talents also. The band would rumble here and there as the minister spoke. Now that's a fun way to rumble. Rumbling to the intensity of places in his sermon.

Almost always, a drum circle is after the service, or part of an activity – function, but I have done it as a part of a church service before. Here's an example outline I was given that was for about an hour & 1/2:

### 1. GATHER IN THE LORD'S NAME

Drumming: a welcoming/gathering rhythm; Shannon introduces newcomers to the circle and explains the rhythm(s).  
Brief spoken prayer at the end (Pastor)

### 2. SCRIPTURE: LUKE 19:29-40

Entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday) (Lector)

Verse 36 ("As he rode along. . .") begin softly drumming, getting very gradually louder and faster. (Shannon) At end of verse 40 ("He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out...") we drum as if we were the stones shouting out glory to God. More than one rhythm is fine. (Shannon)

### 3. Prayers of the People

Earth rhythm. (Shannon) Series of "bidding" prayers: Request for prayer on various topics (prayers for the church, the sick, the dead, troubled spots, thanksgivings). Response is a few moments of drumming, then softer for the next bidding prayer. (Rector)

### 4. Exchange the Peace

Invite everyone to play a simple rhythm on the drum of the person to the right of them, then to the left.

### 5. Take Eucharist

Pastor goes to table in center of drum circle and does an extemporaneous Eucharistic prayer. Shannon alone accompanies the words with drum. This will be a time of words/pauses (with drum)/words/(pauses (with drum) – no sense of hurry. (Shannon and Pastor work together)

### 6. Lord's Prayer

No drumming while this is recited. (Pastor + everyone)

### 7. Break and Share Bread and Wine

Simple, soft rhythm of peace that people can leave off while receiving bread and wine, then easily pick back up when finished. Depending on the number of people, this will take 5+ minutes. There should be a few moments of drumming while Pastor tidies up the leftover elements. (Shannon)

### 8. Thanksgiving!

Another time of big, enthusiastic drumming! This and the "stones" drumming (end of #2) should be the lengthiest and most spirited times of drumming. More than one rhythm is fine. (Shannon)

### 9. Blessing

Pastor blesses and dismisses everyone

This was held outside in a park, (on church property), and it was a very powerful experience. Obviously we had a prior meeting, as this outline had to be planned in advance. It was what they wanted, and while I was a little nervous about it, everything went beautifully.

So to sum up, I work with all paths. I don't refer to myself as Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Pagan, etc. or any other dogma. I don't completely subscribe to any one particular religious group or ideal, but I am a christian. Words can be a credible barrier to the understanding of human spirituality. I prefer to take from each religion and culture what I feel kindred to. And I do consider myself to be a spiritual person. Drumming is my outlet, my sanctity, where I feel the most at home. As I mentioned, some drum circles in churches focus on spirituality; some others focus more on drumming as a social activity. That is often to entice more young people to participate.

Again, the main thing is, I try to get each person on a body drum, so they can feel the healing power of the drum in their bodies, and have a more spiritual drumming experience. I do bring a few big plastic bins of mixed percussion items to keep things interesting for the group, and to entice the shy ones to get involved. Once they see everyone is having a good time, and not really focusing on them, they usually move to a body drum. (Which is the main reason I bring small percussion items.)

I don't bring anything that can be played with a stick. It usually finds its way to a drum head. Not good. Sound shapes with plastic sticks are okay, but anything played with a wooden stick...nope. I do have a few guiro's, woodblocks, and such, but the stick is attached to it with a 2 foot nylon string.

Much of the world's most powerful music is associated with religion and spirituality. Music down through the ages has been designed to take the listener to another place. Facilitating a church, or spiritual drum circle usually affects me very deeply also, even though my beliefs may differ from their particular ones.

Drum circles bring us all together. The healing energy of the drum transcends all. And, somehow, it also brings us closer to our higher power, regardless of how we perceive that.

Shannon

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Growing, Loving and Celebrating with Christ

August, 2008

Dear brothers and sisters of our faith community:

I would like to introduce you to my good friend, Shannon Ratigan, whom we've had the good pleasure of having at our church on several occasions. Shannon is a percussionist and a drum circle facilitator, and I must honestly say he is one of the most important individuals who have ever entered into my life and ministry. God has given him the gift of music through drums, and I would strongly encourage you to have him at your church or synagogue.

A drum circle is truly a spiritual experience. Shannon will bring 30 or more of his own drums and percussion/rhythm instruments to your fellowship hall and easily enable your people to enter into a time of true joy, unity, and even healing.

As Shannon writes, "everything has a rhythm, and the rhythm of our own heart tells us that there is a natural rhythm that is ours exclusively. A drum circle brings people together by using our uniqueness to create something that belongs to all of us. I believe in not telling people how, when, or what to play, but focusing more on self discovery, enabling participants to find their musical selves at their own pace."

Anyone can participate in a drum circle, from kids to seniors. It was our experience here at Church of the Good Shepherd that the drum circle works best with a gathering of your people in a fellowship hall sometime after your regular worship service. Shannon's fee is extremely reasonable, and invited donations from members can help to defray the cost even more if you choose to ask for offerings.

In short, there is no good reason whatsoever to not have this good, kind and gentle teacher at your place of worship for a drum circle. Believe me, it will truly bless your life and the lives of your people. It is one of the most spiritually integrating and energizing experiences I've ever had in my life.

Please feel free to call me anytime if I could answer any questions for you or be of further help in any way whatsoever (cell: 727 458 2625).

Faithfully yours,

The Rev. Bob Williams, Rector, Church of the Good Shepherd

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June 14, 2012

Re: Shannon Ratigan, Drum Circle Leader

To Whom it May Concern:

One of the first activities the people in my new parish wanted me to come to was a drum circle, on the beach, at sunset. I was extremely leery and wondered what sort of bizarre congregation I had agreed to serve. But, I went, my desire to be seen as accessible outweighing my misgivings about the event.

Within a few moments, Shannon had not only reassured me that there was nothing weird about drum circles, he had promised that I would have a lot of fun. He was absolutely right on both counts.

Since then, we have asked Shannon to facilitate about two drum circles a year, some held on the church property and others off site. Parishioners of all ages love these events, and it is one of the most intergenerational activities we have.

This past spring, Shannon and I collaborated on developing a "Drumming Up Hope" Eucharist. Instead of singing, we all drummed, using various rhythms Shannon selected that were appropriate for the particular place in the liturgy. We had several newcomers present, and they commented that it was one of the best services they had ever participated in.

Please do not hesitate to call me if you have any questions about drum circles as a parish activity, or about Shannon's services and abilities. Most of all, I hope you will give drumming a shot. I believe you will find a powerful new way of expressing the joy of our faith in God.

Peace,

(The Rev.) Becky Robbins-Penniman  
Rector

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I hope you enjoyed reading my page, and if you facilitate drum circles, some of my methods and writing helps you.

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The proceeds from the sales of my drumming CD's, DVD's, and drum circle book helps me to do this kind of work in our community, and keep the website going. I try to provide them at as reasonable a cost as possible. As an independent artist, money is tight, so I always appreciate a product that is a good value for the cost. That's the idea behind my book, CD's and DVD.

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There is increasing recognition of the health benefits of music therapy, particularly facilitated hand drumming. Below I offer my drum circle book, 101 rhythms DVD, and drum circle jam music for sale. Unfortunately, places where the people who benefit from what I do the most, have very limited budgets.

I've never recieved any grants, assistance, or funding, and I don't endorse drum companies.

If you would be willing to make a purchase of any amount to help me continue to provide therapeutic music to groups in St. Louis, it would help out a little. Please click on the purchase links below.

Thanks in advance if you can pitch in a little. My book & DVD are solid if you are facilitating drum circles, or thinking about starting one up for your area, or group.

My 101 Drum Circle Rhythms video on Amazon. Over 2 hours of them. The full download to 2 devices is \$8. Here's the link, or search on the title. 101 Drum Circle Rhythms (The DVD disc is a few bucks more.)

[101 Drum Circle Rhythms Download Link](#)

My 300 page drum circle book: "A Practical Guide Hand Drumming and Drum Circles" is also \$8.

[Drum Circle Book On Amazon Kindle](#)

CdBaby link (Digital drum circle jam music) - They have "Wild Drum Circles" (Not on iTunes yet)

[Drum Circle Music Download at CD Baby](#)

iTunes link (Most of my digital drum circle music)

[Drum Circle Jam Music at iTunes](#)

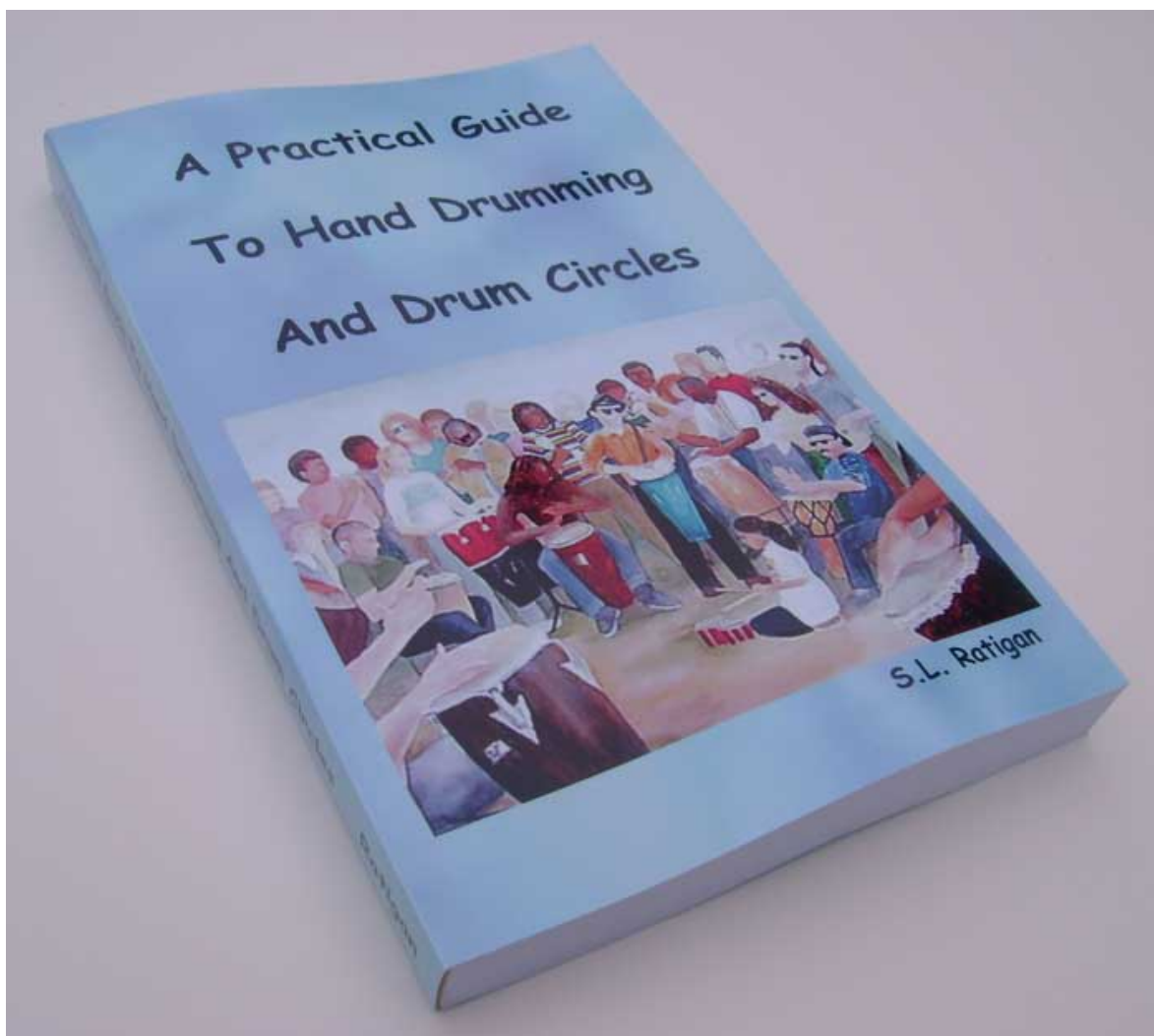
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300 page book, "A Practical Guide To Hand Drumming And Drum Circles" is \$8. on Amazon Kindle.

If your desire is to get much more in depth with this, please consider picking it up. It goes into starting a drum circle, and how to keep it fresh and interesting for all different kinds of groups.

I cover all of this, and much more in great detail. 300 pages \$8. The link for it is below.





Click the link below to go to the [drumcircles.net](http://drumcircles.net) main page. Listen to some drum circle music, lists of notated drum rhythms, testimonials, references, and lots more.

[Back to drumcircles.net main page](http://drumcircles.net)



All of my drumming and drum circle music tracks are copyrighted, and licensed.

Check out CDBaby.com & listen to a few. There's a wide variety of cultures, styles, and tempos to choose from.

Here's the website url: <http://www.cdbaby.com/Artist/SLRatigan>

Or, click the CDbaby.com link below:

[My CD Baby Artist Page](http://www.cdbaby.com/Artist/SLRatigan)

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